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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 004901

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV CH

SUBJECT: VIOLENCE AGAINST REPORTERS, SIDE EFFECT OF GROWING MEDIA POWER

REF: A. FBIS CPP20070707050001

1B. BEIJING 4236

Classified By: Acting Political Minister-Counselor Ben Moeling. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

11. (C) Since the January death of a reporter at an illegal coal mine in Shanxi, China's media is becoming more aggressive in publicizing attacks against journalists, according to Embassy contacts. The July 4 beating of a reporter by county-level officials in Xiji, Ningxia has generated interest in journalism circles because of the atypically strong response of the local Communist Party Committee, which quickly suspended the official responsible and ordered a written apology from the officials to the reporter's newspaper. Clashes between journalists and local officials and business people are on the rise this year, according to one contact. Another journalist told us that, while she finds such attacks on her colleagues disturbing, they actually reflect the growing power of China's press. End summary.

Beating Draws (Rare) Apology

12. (SBU) The Construction and Environmental Protection Bureau in Xiji County, Ningxia issued a written apology to the Xin Xiaoxi newspaper (a local paper affiliated with the Ningxia Daily) July 5 following the beating of a Xin Xiaoxi reporter by Bureau employees the previous day (Ref A). While such a written apology from a government agency is rare, journalist contacts tell us, violent attacks on reporters are common in China today. In addition to the July 4 beating in Xiji, other incidents include:

--the January 10 fatal beating of Lan Chengzhang, a freelancer for the Zhongguo Maoyi Bao (China Trade News), at an illegal coal mine in Shanxi Province;

--the February 7 assault by security guards on a Guangxi Television reporter who was investigating allegations of wage arrears at a local land development company; and,

--the May 3, 2006 beating (also by security guards) of a China Central Television (CCTV) crew investigating an accident at the "Windows of the World" tourist site in Changsha, Hunan.

13. (SBU) While the death of Lan Chengzhang gained widespread international attention, the Xiji case is much more typical of the day-to-day challenges

journalists face, particularly when they find themselves on the wrong side of local officials or business interests. According to one press account, the Xiji incident began June 30 when Gao Zhirong, the deputy head of the county-level Construction and Environmental Protection Bureau, detained a woman for allowing her child to relieve himself on a city street. Angry over the allegedly illegal three-hour detention and RMB 400 (USD 50) fine, the woman complained to a Xin Xiaoxi reporter. When the journalist attempted July 4 to interview Gao about the incident, he was surrounded and beaten by ten of Gao's underlings. The county Party Committee later suspended Gao and ordered Gao's boss to issue an apology.

Preventative Strike

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¶4. (C) Zhou Qingan (strictly protect), a freelance journalist and Professor at Qinghua University, told Poloff that violence against reporters is a growing concern. Noting that nearly all incidents of violence involve reporters covering local stories, Zhou said the beating of journalists is part of a much wider problem of lawlessness, corruption, and lack of official accountability in small-town China. Local cadres or business owners, Zhou said, attempt to physically intimidate journalists in order to nip any negative reporting in the bud. Local officials know that once a story makes it into print and onto the Internet, beating up the reporter responsible will only serve to draw more unwanted attention. Zhou said the problem is not restricted to local newspapers and television stations. As the beating of the CCTV crew

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in Changsha last year indicates, journalists from major national media outlets are not immune from such attacks. CCTV camera crews, Zhou said, are roughed up on an increasingly regular basis.

The "Silver Lining"

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¶5. (C) Zhang Shensi (strictly protect), International Editor for the Legal Daily, said China's media is becoming more aggressive about publicizing attacks on journalists. Zhang acknowledged that corruption within her own profession, i.e. journalists seeking bribes in exchange for spiking negative stories, has created a more antagonistic atmosphere for reporters. The silver lining, Zhang said, is that such physical intimidation reflects the growing power of the news media. In the past, Zhang said, local cadres and business leaders had little to fear from China's tightly controlled press. Now, China's media enjoys increasing freedom to report bad news, to the chagrin of local officials who find themselves facing popular anger and official inquiry as a result of negative stories. For example, Zhang cited the recent disclosure of slave labor used at brick kilns in Shanxi and Henan Provinces. A local Henan television station broke the story, which has had national repercussions (Ref B). Zhang also noted that a growing gap exists between central and local government attitudes towards journalists. Though some topics remain off-limits, Zhang said, the central government is gradually giving the Chinese press a freer reign. Local officials, by contrast, continue to view the media according to the old model under which journalists were always subservient to party and government officials.

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